

SUMMARY

MONTANA WETLAND COUNCIL MEETING

Thursday January 31, 2008

9:30 am – 4:00 pm

DEQ Directors Conference Room
1520 East 6th Avenue, Helena MT

Welcome, Introductions and Wetland Council Report.

Lynda Saul, Wetland Program Manager, MT Dept of Environmental Quality

- Distributed and discussed the Wetland Council's new *Strategic Framework* 2008-2012 ([Priceless Resources– A Strategic Framework for Wetland and Riparian Area Conservation and Restoration](#))
- Encourage everyone to indicate their interest in serving on a Council Working Group. Working Group Chairs are identified below: See action items on last page.
 - Public Education/Professional Training WG - new DEQ staff (lsaul@mt.gov)
 - Mapping Working Group gkudray@mt.gov
 - Assessment & Monitoring Working Group LiVance@mt.gov
 - Restoration Working Group thin@mt.gov
 - Local Government/Community WG - new DEQ Staff (lsaul@mt.gov)
 - Vulnerable Wetlands/Public Policy Working Group lsaul@mt.gov
 - Council's Steering Committee lsaul@mt.gov
- June 10-12 in Dillon MT. Next Council Meeting, Wetland Habitat tour, and Strategic Framework rollout.
- Thanks to today's speakers who will discuss the vulnerability of wetlands and associated grassland loss in Montana and help identify solutions and actions. [Bio's](#)
- The purpose of the meeting is to identify and discuss actions Council participants and others can take to address the vulnerability and loss of wetlands as a *Strategic Framework* goal.

[Lynda Saul's PowerPoint Presentation](#)

Lynda Saul set the context for discussing wetland and grassland loss based on the national status and trends report. The most recent report (1998-2004) indicated a 700,000 acre increase (12.6%) in open water ponds and noted that "without an increase in ponds, gains would have failed to surpass losses." However, quality, function, and condition of these replacement ponds were not evaluated and only 2 percent of open water ponds from 1987-1997 were reclassified as vegetated wetlands. More than 50% of freshwater vegetated wetland loss was from wetlands less than 1 acre in size. Considerable losses included the prairie pothole region. Nationally 564,300 acres of wetlands were restored on agricultural lands, but new loss of wetlands to agriculture use totaled 488,200 acres. A national wetland condition assessment program is planned for 2011. Montana will likely only include 50 sampling points; an insufficient amount to determine the condition of the state's diverse wetland resource.

Montana specific information about loss and gain is being investigated in pilot areas of Western Montana: Bitterroot, Flathead and Gallatin thanks to a 3-year EPA grant.

Bitterroot results from the MTNHP are here [Wetlands of the Bitterroot Valley: Change and Ecological Functions, January 2008](#)

Some of the more significant results includes: 80% reduction in beaver pond acreage and numbers in the last 20 years, human construction of over 920 new ponds, less than 30% had required water right permits, and fish stocking permits (which were not required until 1998) total 252 permits. DEQ investigated CWA section 404 permitted requests and actions and found that nearly half (202 of 422) lacked permit impact information preventing DEQ from accurately identifying the effect of the CWA program on wetland loss and gain. The Legacy Partnership logged 3 protection projects total 503 new acres in permanent protection and 3 restoration project involving 113 acres. Please contact lsaul@mt.gov for more information.

Ranchers Stewardship Alliance: Partnering for Vibrant Prairie Communities.

Linda Poole & Janet Veseth, The Nature Conservancy & Ranchers Stewardship Alliance
[Linda Poole's PowerPoint Presentation](#)

Linda Poole discussed the evolution of community-based conservation and partnerships in South Phillips County and provided a compelling story for supporting and participating in these partnerships in order to meet ecological and human community stewardship and sustainability goals. Janet Veseth was ill and unable to attend, but Poole read her words about her perspective of community-based conservation ([Janet Veseth's presentation](#)) while the Council witnessed stunning photos of South Phillips County. "... our Montana ranching community was at a crossroads. Ranchers smoldered over ... But then came the moment for us to choose our response: whether to fight back ... or to try a totally opposite approach of careful, respectful engagement with agencies and conservation groups. After thorough discussion, we chose to give the latter option one try."

The mission of the Ranchers Stewardship Alliance is to promote the ecological, social and economic conditions that will sustain the biodiversity and integrity of America's northern mixed-grass prairie for present and future generations. RSA works to support cost-effective, sustainable conservation that features private and public cooperation in a working landscape stewarded by profitable family ranches and thriving rural communities.

Poole discussed The Nature Conservancy (TNC) glaciated plains project goal to restore and protect 3 million acres of native grasslands and viable populations of associated wildlife through voluntary, collaborative action of diverse stakeholders by 2020. TNC purchase of the 60,000-acre Matador Ranch in 2000 which provided the keystone for community-based conservation, especially via grassbanking. Grassbanking swaps grass for conservation and provided economics showing typical AUM costs and reduced costs for local ranchers which partner in the Matador Ranch grassbank program. TNC forgoes revenue of about \$30-50,000/year to support good stewardship on neighboring ranches, such as refraining from sodbusting and actively monitor and manage against weeds. She explained that TNC has come to recognize and appreciate that full success will require willing and widespread participation by ranchers and other commodity-based groups - grassbanking is one tool that fosters the collaboration required to secure a future for both the human and the natural communities that represent the richness of the

northern Great Plains. From Veseth's perspective as a member of the Ranchers Stewardship Alliance, the grassbank partnership between local ranchers and TNC has proven that incentive-driven, market-based programs between ranchers and environmentalists can be beneficial to all involved.

Healthy intact grassland systems are integral to healthy wetlands on the prairies of Montana. If you missed this presentation, you missed hearing about an inspiring model for community based conservation and one my personal highlights from 10 years of leading the Montana Wetland Council. Watch the PP or seek out their live presentation and then let's help to emulate this model tailoring it to the challenges and opportunities of other communities in Montana. Please contact Linda Poole at lpool@tnc.org for more information.

Vulnerable Wetlands: Identification and Analysis of Geographically Isolated Wetlands in Montana.

Linda Vance, Ecologist, Montana Natural Heritage Program

[Linda Vance's PowerPoint Presentation](#)

Linda Vance provided background on recent federal courts rulings that restrict Clean Water Act jurisdiction over wetlands not connected to navigable rivers. In the Glaciated Plains, many wetlands have no apparent surface water connection to any river system, and in the absence of state legislation, may lack any substantial legal protection. At the same time, these wetlands are under pressure from resource extraction and crop agriculture. MT NHP used a GIS to analyze the extent of isolated wetlands across mapped areas of Montana, and to identify wetlands which might be particularly vulnerable. Results showed that of the 173,659 mapped wetlands in their analysis, 45% had no visible surface water connection to any other waterbody. Most of these wetlands were small (<1/2 acre), with a temporary or seasonal flooding regime. In the Northwestern Great Plains and Glaciated Plains, the majority of isolated wetlands (72% and 58% respectively) are on private lands. Showed the percent of mapped wetlands classified as geographically isolated, but also noted that data limitation hamper this research since most of the state is not mapped. Provided observation from several summers in the field that wetlands on state owned land are in poor condition compared to typically better stewardship on private land. This should be quantified with an inventory of state owned lands and wetland condition. Discussed the importance of isolated wetlands and the multiple threats they face and offered perspectives on how we can provide protection to these wetlands, such as: the Clean Water Act still offers some protection, the federal Clean Water Restoration Act; State and local regulation is possible, Farm Bill programs, incentive programs, WRP, Wetlands Legacy, community based/locally led efforts, conservation easements and acquisitions, and individual landowner efforts. Please contact Linda Vance LiVance@mt.gov for more information.

Prairie Pothole Grassland Sod-busting and Related Wetland Losses.

Bob Sanders, Manager of Conservation Programs Montana, Ducks Unlimited Inc.

[Bob Sander's PowerPoint Presentation](#)

Bob Sander reported that the Farm Service Agency identified 9,748 acres of sod-busting occurred in the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR) of Montana in 2007. An additional 15,148 acres

of sod-busting occurred in 2005 and 2006. He brought attention to the fact that while wetlands within grasslands (60% of remaining wetlands) and Conservation Reserve Program (8%) are considered an asset or neutral, wetlands within croplands (32%) are considered a nuisance. Several economic factors are driving many landowners to expand tillage of native prairie and other grassland ecosystems including those with intact wetlands. Threats to grasslands and CRP in Montana include:

- Conversion of Grasslands to Cropland – wetland status from asset to nuisance
- Loss of CRP – 1.5 million acres of CRP in Montana PPR coming out of enrollment in 2007 (out of total 2.3 million acres)
- Organic Farming – sodbusted land doesn't need to wait required 3 years for crops to be certified organic
- Biofuels – subsidies and incentives for new crops and crop land
- Oil and Gas Development – fragments grassland/wetland complexes, spills

Fragmentation of uplands adjacent to wetland basins has a negative effect on grassland nesting species. In addition to direct losses, wetland degradation from adjacent land use practices further underscore the need to protect grassland/wetland systems. The challenge is that current policies and economic drivers seem to favor sod-busting despite the potential impacts to wetlands and historic grassland ecosystems.

- 8,000 Year-old Prairies
- Low Agricultural Productivity
- Highly Erodable
- Subsidies to Break Ground
- Crop Insurance

Concern was voiced that while the public is alarmed when 500 year old-redwood trees are cut, few people are aware that 8,000 year-old prairies are being destroyed. From satellite imagery we learned that 144,000 acres of 8,000 year-old prairies were lost in the Missouri Coteau from 1984-2003. The presentation offered perspectives on why this happening and graphed the difference in payments for croplands versus grasslands.

Conservation tools include: 2007 Farm Bill programs, FWS grassland easements, other easement programs, sale of carbon credits, and public education. Most important is to provide economic incentives for agricultural producers to keep grass on the landscape. Presented an example of a revolving land strategy and other economically viable alternatives for maintaining large blocks of grass on the landscape as a way to offset grassland losses and maintain existing wetland complexes. Please contact Bob Sanders at rsanders@ducks.org or (406) 492-2002 for more information.

Farm Bill Conservation Title and the Intermountain West Joint Venture – New Wetland Protection and Land Conservation Possibilities.

Dave Smith, Coordinator, Intermountain West Joint Venture

[Dave Smith's PowerPoint Presentation](#)

Dave Smith discussed the Intermountain West Joint Venture and the 2007 Farm Bill and linked his talk to Council Strategic Direction #4: Restoration and Strategic Direction #7: Public Policy. He described the all-bird focus of the IWJV and partnership based approach to getting on the ground habitat conservation in the 11 state intermountain west region. He provided information about the science foundation of the IWJV and focus area approach for habitat delivery. IWJV is under represented in applying for small NAWCA

grants. Smith encouraged everyone to look out for good projects, create partnerships, and submit applications, up to \$75,000, proposals received 2x/year.

<http://www.fws.gov/birdhabitat/Grants/NAWCA/Small/index.shtm>

In addition, IWJV has its own project funding program and recently restructure staff.

The Farm Bill has passed out of both the House and Senate with strong conservation titles in both versions and is currently in conference committee. The current versions contain new wetland and land conservation provisions to assist Montana producers with land stewardship, such as: working land provisions in the Wetland Reserve Enhancement Program, Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative, and Regional Water Enhancement Program. Dave provided details of these programs and the significance of farm bill programs in Montana. He introduced Council participants to the IWJV Farm Bill initiative to assist its conservation partners in working with NRCS and FSA throughout 11 states in the West and discussed the importance of the new IWJV farm bill coordinator position. Finally he encouraged everyone to get involved in implementation and Farm Bill initiatives identifying rulemaking, the State Technical Advisory Committee and working with NRCS.

Council Discussion

Wetland Council Participants and Federal/State/NGO Resource Panel

- ***Rick Northrup, Statewide Game Bird Coordinator, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks***
- ***Jim Stuzman, Montana Partners for Wildlife State Coordinator, US Fish and Wildlife Service***
- ***Dave Smith, Coordinator, Intermountain West Joint Venture***
- ***Pete Husby, State Biologist, US Natural Resource and Conservation Service***
- ***Glenn Patrick, Chief Conservation/Price Support Program Specialist, US Farm Services Agency***
- ***Bob Sanders, Manager of Conservation Programs Montana, Ducks Unlimited Inc.***

A panel of wetland resource experts provided observations about obstacles, challenges, needs, and opportunities to effective wetland and grassland protection and restoration program delivery. They also discussed what actions the Council participants and the Council can take to address the vulnerability and loss of wetlands and associated grasslands.

Panel members identified that there are a lot of great programs, but the main obstacle is delivery of these programs on the ground. Identified that a major need is to support and foster community-based conservation initiatives as a key ingredient in successful sustainable landscape conservation and restoration. Limited start up funds for a coordinator or staff and longer-term administrative funds were identified both as barriers and critical in supporting these initiatives. Another key aspect is committed, engaged and flexible agency personnel working on the ground with local communities. Council participants were encouraged to identify these needs to agency management and support the right person, in the right place to provide technical assistance to local groups. Concern was raised that Montana lacks needed protection and has limited enforcement of scant existing regulations. Contrasts were made with other state regulatory programs.

Concerns were also voiced that agencies (even different divisions within agencies) are working at cross purposes and wetland, grassland and riparian loss is occurring: an example was presented from Southwest Montana.

The following action items were identified at the meeting and in subsequent meeting follow up that Council participants and Council Working Groups can take:

Public Education/Professional Training Working Group

- Dedicate time as a resource professional for cross training about different restoration and protection programs between and within agencies. Include NGO's.
- Provide training on restoration programs to other resource professional.
- Inform public of restoration programs/opportunities

Mapping Working Group

- Concentrate on mapping restoration focus areas as a first priority

Assessment & Monitoring Working Group

- Assess wetland condition on state-owned lands

Restoration Working Group

- In-lieu fee program administrator needed
- Build geographically located teams similar to Colorado Focus Group approach
- Select focus areas to concentrate efforts, build off existing efforts

Local Government/Community Working Group

- Support and foster community-based conservation/stewardship initiatives through grant programs and other resources
- Target start up funds for local community-based efforts, especially coordinator position. Seek out sustainable administrative/staff funding
- Encourage agency staffing to support locally led efforts through examples of success

Vulnerable Wetlands/Public Policy Working Group

- Address water rights beneficial use criteria to include wetlands. New purposes added since 2005 include: mitigation water, wetland mitigation credit, wetland, water marketing, and augmentation.
- Evaluate regulatory and policy options that have agencies working at cross purposes.
- In 1999 a moratorium was lifted on sodbusting on school trust lands. Investigate the impact this is having on wetland and grassland loss.

Council's Steering Committee

- Distribute Council meeting summary
- Track follow up of Working Groups
- Dedicate future Council meeting to wetland/grassland loss topic

Wetland Updates and Coordination Reports

Council Chair encouraged participants to submit written information for the new online Wetland News Letter which will be published soon. Submit information to lsaul@mt.gov

Adjourn

**The Next Wetland Council Meeting, June 10-12 in Dillon Montana.
Coordinated with the Wetland Habitat Tour and Wetland Strategic
Framework Rollout.**

The Montana Wetland Council meets three times a year and is an active network of diverse interests that works cooperatively to conserve and restore Montana's wetland and riparian ecosystems. Everyone is welcome to attend and participate. For additional information please contact Lynda Saul, Montana DEQ, (406) 444-6652 or lsaul@mt.gov

Montana Wetlands Council Participants
January 31, 2008
Montana Wetland Council meeting

Name	Representing
William Kleindl	NAIAD Aquatic Consultants
Sue Ball	CSKT Wetland Program
Corey Baker	Gradient Environmental Inc.
Mike Waite	Congressman Denny Rehberg
Jim Stutzman	US FWS
Glenn Patrick	FSA
Tracy Novak	Wetland Consultant-Bozeman
Lawrence Urban	MDT
Tim McNaboe	MDT
Brian Martin	TNC
Jim Hansen	MT FWP
Rick Sojda	USDI-Geological Survey
Bart Manion	Confluence Inc.
Duane Lund	MSL-NRIS
Rick Northrup	MT FWP
Russell Smith	Oasis Environmental
Michael Downey	MT Land Reliance
Mary Guokas	MT DNRC
Robert Ray	MT DEQ
Bob Sanders	Ducks Unlimited
Peter Husby	NRCS
Maureen Kiely	US EPA-Helena
Janet Ellis	MT Audubon
Sue Crispin	MTNHP
Dave Smith	Intermountain West JV
Christine Morias	Intermountain West JV
Kristi Du Bois	MT FWP
Scott Mincemoyer	MTNHP
John Beaver	Westech Environmental
Doug McDonald	FWP
Mike Philbin	BLM
David Stagliano	MTNHP
Ann Carlson	USFS Missoula
Steve Shelly	USFS-Missoula
Mike Bias	Big Hole River Foundation
Steve Parker	Big Hole River Foundation
Meghan Burns	MTNHP
Sloane Gray	MTNHP
Joe Meek	MT DEQ

Brian Sandefur	Confluence
Janet Bender-Keigley	MT Watercourse
Shannon Downey	MT DEQ-IEMB
Martha Kauffman	WWF/Oxbow
Ethan Mace	DNRC WR
Susan Lenard	MNHP
Mary C. Weatherwax	Blackfeet Tribe
Linda Vance	MTNHP
Lynda Saul	MT DEQ-Wetlands
Jane Horton	MT DEQ-Wetlands
Hal Harper	Governor's Office
Glenn Marx	MT Association of Land Trusts
Linda Poole	TNC/Ranchers Stewardship Alliance
Carol Gilmore	MT DEQ
Britt Long	MT DNRC
Wease Bollman	Rhithron Associates Inc